

The Bell-Hanger

By MYRNA WALSH

As she started to climb the First Parish belfry, she turned and said, "With my knapsack on my back and my poncho over it, I'm told I look like Quasimodo."



Rev. Robert Walsh and Linda Campbell Woodford

Photo by Robert Walsh

Maybe more like Joan of Arc in Levis. But either way, Linda Campbell Woodford is unique. She is the only bell-hanger in New England to specialize in hanging bells for change ringing and the only woman bell-hanger in America, perhaps the world. She is also the only woman to have ever apprenticed in the 413-year history of the prestigious Whitechapel Foundries -- the casting place of Big Ben and the second Liberty Bell. There she learned to cast bells weighing several tons and to repair their fittings and hangings.

Linda speaks to the point, acknowledging that her mannerisms put off some people. She is unsure why this happens, yet she perseveres in speaking her mind. Her conversation is peppered with British colloquialisms -- a result of her 3 years at Whitechapel and reinforced by nearly annual visits to the bells of Great Britain.

Her close-cropped hair, an apparent occupational necessity, is none-the-less startling. She wears neither makeup nor jewelry. The rust of the bells lines her short fingernails. Her dry, often self-

effacing humor, belies the determination and grit that has enabled her to succeed in a masculine, medieval craft.

After graduating from Boston University with majors in English and music composition, she worked for 7 years for a Boston publisher feeling "miserable and being cooped up inside." She started to ring the bells at the Church of the Advent, apprenticing under Geoffrey Davies. The more she rang the bells the more she cared for them. She loved their sounds and personalities, enjoyed repairing them.

The offer to apprentice at Whitechapel changed the direction of her life. It meant she could do the work she loved if she was willing to risk financial security, and conventional expectations of women's work.

The men at Whitechapel had never worked alongside a woman before. "They didn't know what to make of me the first day, but when they saw me pulling my own weight, they were the salt of the earth." At 121 pounds, Linda pulls more than her own weight. She often works with bells 10 times her weight. Her experience with the men at Whitechapel is forever repeated as she works along with construction men, blacksmiths, and welders.

Even before she started ringing and hanging bells, Linda had a special affinity to bells. "I had a recurring dream when I was young about being a bell ringer." She told the *Boston Globe*, "I live to ring. I'm very intensely focused." She even carries pictures of bells and their hardware in her wallet.

She spoke about the complexity of sound coming from a bell swung nearly 360 degrees and is outright disdainful of pre-recorded chimes. "I will set up a bell to be tolled electronically. But a bell should be rung by hand. Once you've lost contact with the bell, you lose the fun of ringing."

Setting bells for change ringing (in which the sequence of ringing follows a precise mathematically changing sequence and one person rings one bell for up to 3 hours) is "a real pain in the butt," she said. "But then all bells have their moments."

When she rehung the Portuguese bells in the Unitarian-Universalist church, she installed completely new fittings. It involved 8 hours of drilling the bolts out and 20 more hours cutting through 11 inches of bronze with a hacksaw. "I was working inside the bell, up over my head with bits of metal falling in my eyes. And I was sawing through wrought iron 2 inches thick." This job, part of which was done in a nor'easter, is her most satisfying.

Her favorite bell is in Bristol, England, the heaviest in a ring of 12, located in St. Mary Redcliffe Church. It weighs 2½ tons.

She set a personal record for bell ringing at the Church of the Advent when she rang a bell 5,040 times in one session. At the Perkins School for the Blind, she set another record. She was the first woman to ring the heaviest bell for a full peal — 3 hours and 21 minutes — with 5,008 changes. The bell weighs 2,500 pounds.

Although New England is the center for bells in the United States, and the potential for work is here, the economics of bell hanging are still

medieval. "Even the churches that need this desperately can't afford it. I'm a bit daft going off without financial security." Then she reconsidered. "It's incredible that I've gotten away with having the world pay me for something I love to do."

She said most bell ringers are well-educated and young. Contrary to popular thought, the sound of bells is not deafening. "You are separated by at least one floor from the bells. You might go a bit spacey but the sound won't kill you. (So much for the murder in "Nine Tailors.") Tiny bells in a small space may rattle your fillings loose, though."

Because she owns no car, she often travels by bus and subway with her knapsack bulging with drills, files and hammers. (Hence the teasing about Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame.) "I will leave a project with a handful of broken bolts. I shan't have to drag a clapper this time. Although I have dragged a clapper with me on the subway."

Linda revealed that she has a touch of claustrophobia and doesn't like climbing on the outside of steeples. "I really hope not to fall out of a tower." But working in an open belfry that sways with each puff of wind, inching along rusting supports on a slanted floor, doesn't faze her. To this rather unconventional woman, it's a step closer to heaven.

The Bell

When the \$75,000 total restoration and refurbishing is done, the First Parish Church bell will ring out with a clear and safer sound.

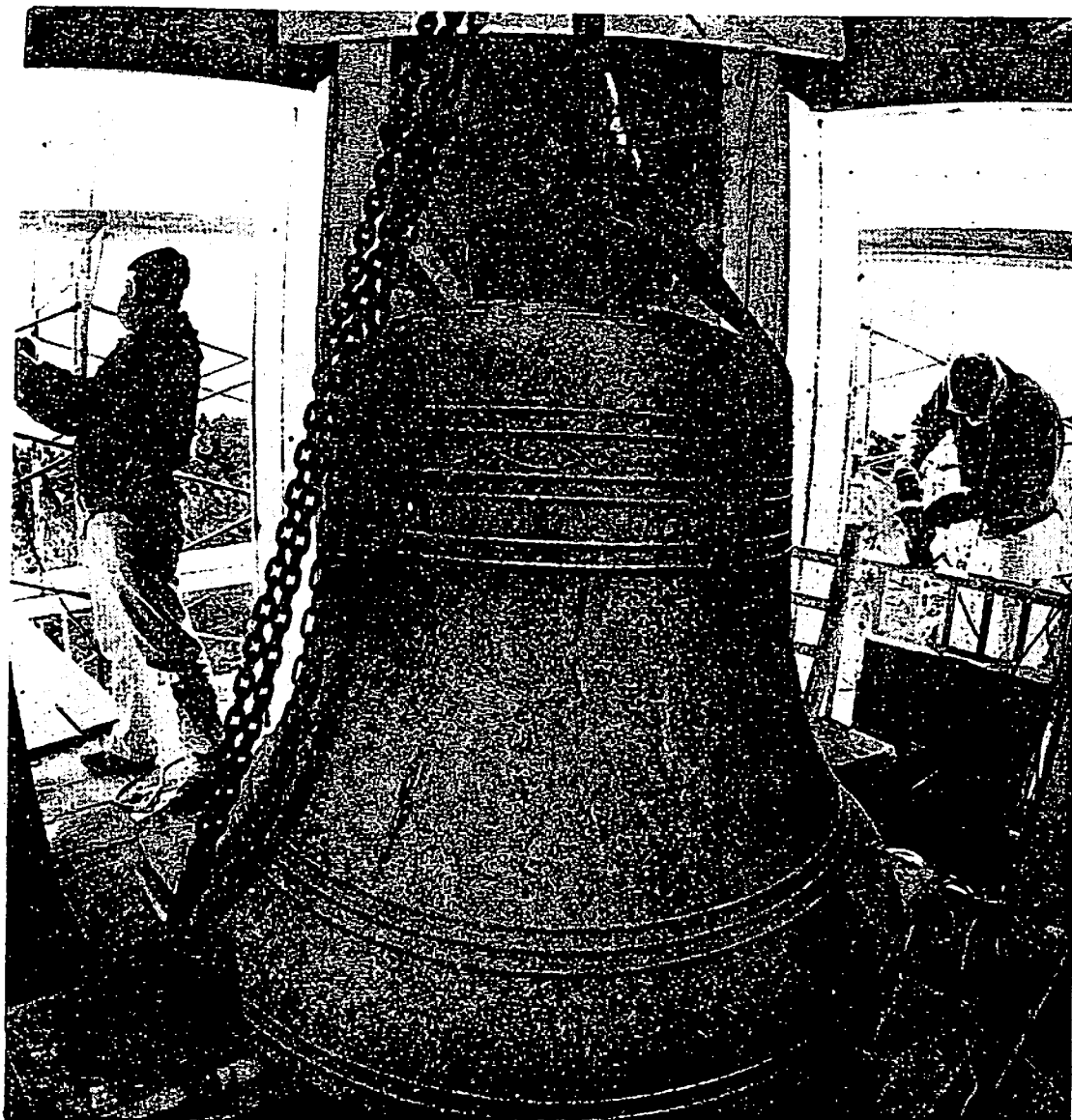
The bell has several porous areas and every time the clapper hits the inside curve, the reverberations cause invisible, destructive damage. Bushings on which the axle turns have disintegrated and 3/4 inch cast iron bolts holding the bell are so worn that many of them taper to thin, fragile points, somewhat like spikes. This deterioration is particularly dangerous because a swinging bell exerts a force 3 times its weight and the First Parish Church's bell is over 1600 pounds.

All the wrought iron fittings have been removed and they will be sandblasted and weather-proofed. The bell wheel will be replaced with one made by the Society of the Preservation of New England Antiquities. This wheel carries the rope by which the bell is rung. At present the bell is unconnected to the hanging equipment; the axle rests on supports brought in by Burdick and Edson who have erected the scaffolding and set up the hoists.

Iron staples hold the clapper to the inside of the bell. Where these staples meet the dome of the bell, rust has accumulated. Linda will remove the rust and seal the area. Minute casting problems, noticable to her trained eye, make it impossible to drill the staples out of the shell.

Because the staples can't be removed, Linda will have to create a special device called a baldrick on which she will support the clapper. After a century and a half, the ball at the end of the clapper has been flattened on its striking side. This end will be reshaped so that the sound of the bell, an F sharp, will be clearer.

But the clapper cannot be reattached to the bell in its previous position. Due to casting errors the area which the clapper previously struck is damaged. When the bell is rehung, it will be turned



Workers sanding bell tower of church during refurbishing.



Greg Derr photos

Men at work on steeple

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, May 12, 1983

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90 degrees, presenting a new face to Tremont St. If the clapper was not reset, it would continue to strike the same damaged area. Since the staples cannot be removed, Linda will design a device similar to a universal joint to turn the clapper 90 degrees from its original position. But, while protecting the bell, it lowers the ball of the clapper about 4 inches below the soundbow, the band around the bell which produces the best sound.

So 4 inches will be cut from the clapper and the 2 ends fire-welded together. Simple welding will not hold under the force of ringing. Fire-welding, done by a blacksmith in a forge, melts and resets the metal.

Even though the bell is only rung in a nearly 360 arc only on special holidays, the rehanging is best done now while the steeple is being refurbished. (A timer, given in memory of Everett Marston, automatically chimes the time by moving a 25-pound extension hammer against the exterior of the bell.)

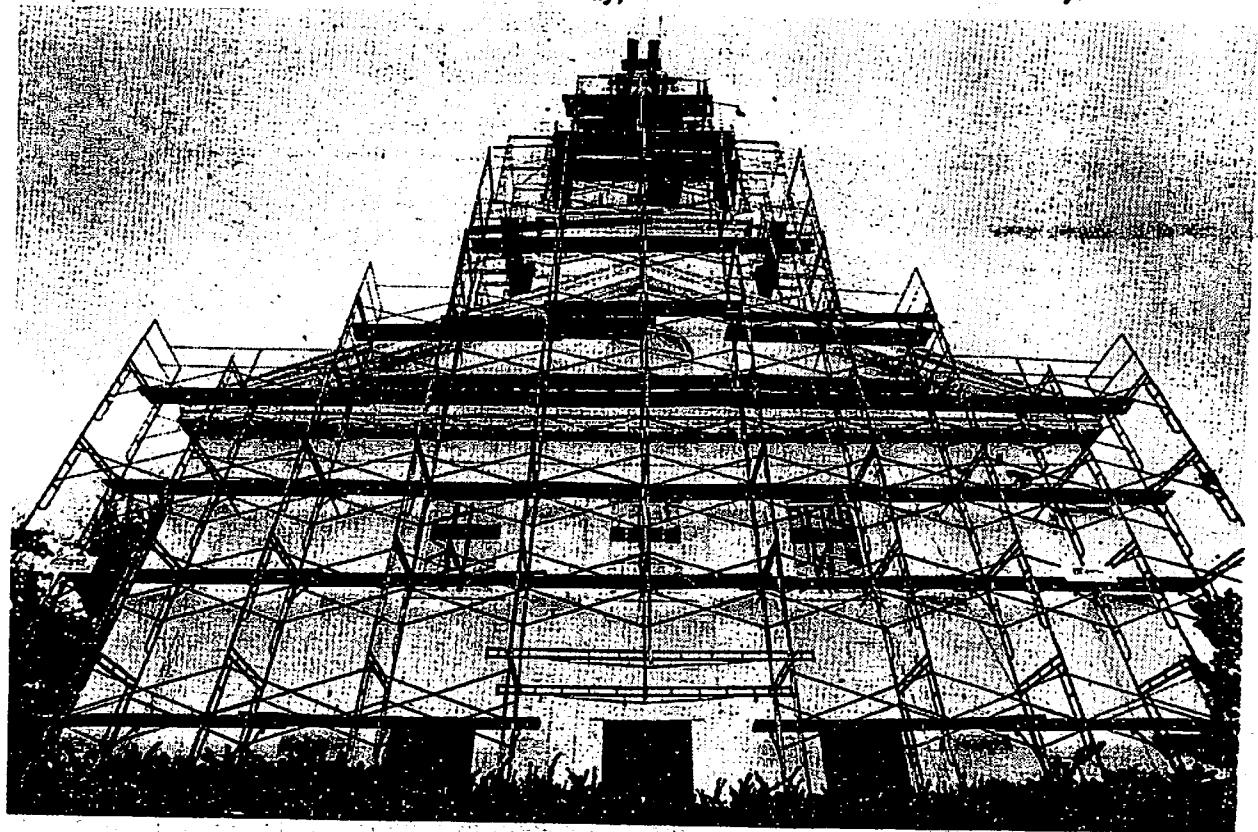
"I'm rehanging the bell because all the fittings are rusting and rotting. They are useless and dangerous." In removing the fittings, Linda will not be tampering with historic relics. The fittings are not the original ones. Neither, it seems, is the bell.

Church records show that the bell was shipped to the church by "oxteam express" in 1819. It weighed 804 pounds and the clapper was 21 pounds. The present bell is 1600 pounds and the clapper is about 45 pounds. The bill of sale is from the E. H. Revere Co. in Canton, a firm owned by the son of Paul Revere. The Revere works are known internationally for the quality and size of their bells. Their masterpiece is considered the 2437-pounder which is still rung daily at Kings Chapel in Boston. More than 1400 bells were cast in Canton, the

largest being 2885 pounds.

However, the bell atop the First Parish Church is not one of them. It is inscribed with the name of its maker, George Handle Holbrook of East Medway,

Mass., who worked with E.H. Revere for a time. Unfortunately there are no records that explain how a bell twice the size of the original and made by a different foundry came to Duxbury.



A view of the superstructure

Photo by Greg Derr